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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief history of higher education in United States prisons, and then describes an on-campus education program for ex-offenders at John Jay College. The following topics are covered: (1) establishing and planning the college orientation program; (2) primary objective and ultimate aim; (3) needs and limitations of ex-offenders; and (4) promise and limitations of the program. (Author/JLL)

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ESTABLISHING A COLLEGE ORIENTATION PROGRAM FOR EX-OFFENDERS

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In order that you might better understand this on campus education program for ex-offenders, I would first like to spend a few moments explaining the history of higher education in our prisons.

In 1953, the President of Southern Illinois University, Delyte Morris, introduced college level courses into the Illinois Correctional system, and that seminal effort had grown to at least 218 other adult correctional institutions, throughout the nation, offering college-level course work as indicated by a national survey undertaken in 1973 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1977).

Undoubtedly, this number has increased in the last few years as innovative correctional leaders look to college education as a component of resocialization. And by resocialization on would suspect that these correctional experts mean rehabilitation, reintegration, and re-entry to a society outside the confines of the prison each year, after they have completed their sentences or obtained parole.

And these 90,000 incarcerated people represent only part of the approximately 500,000 adults who are incarcerated in city, county, state and federal facilities in any one year. With an almost equally divided between white and minority groups, and 74% ranging in age from 18 to 34 (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 1973).

More and more, it seems higher education is being accepted as a part of prison programs, and somewhat more slowly acknowledged as a valuable rehabilitative tool. In New York State, for instance, the college for inmates program has grown from one class in the Spring of 1970, at Duchess Community College for 18 students, to 15 college operating 1,236 credit bearing courses

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in 15 correctional facilities with a total registration of over 4,300 during the Fall 1976 semester.

Indeed, this educational activity is to be commended and certainly emulated by other colleges in many states; but first we must ask what problems these programs have experiences during these past few years. And certainly we must evaluate the goals for such programs, while attempting to understand the expectations and aspirations of the exceptional students who enroll in these higher education courses. What their basic needs are, if they are being met, and who are the best trained persons who can meet these needs, are questions we must ask ourselves as educators.

1) Unfortunately, no one has yet evaluated these programs;

2) Thus they grow with their problems abounding;

3) Their alumni entering society, hoping to continue their education at many colleges where they once might never thought of applying;

4) Worse yet, many of these same college never thought they would have ex-offenders - former criminals, convicts applying for admissions.

But what did we as educators expect? Were we educating these students for only a limited time, for non-degrees only to increase our enrollments; to show off our community service? Or rather were we concerned for the true and complete education of these students?

Well, whatever our intentions, these same students, formerly incarcerated, are at our admissions offices seeking entrance to our campus classrooms, wishing to learn and mingle with our general campus population. The question now is, are we ready for them? Will we accept them and are we prepared to help them to adjust to college? Do we offer the services they require?

At John Jay College two years ago we were not ready when these same students came seeking admissions. Though we had been teaching at a local City

penal institution, Rikers Island, for the past 8 years - we had only a few students during this period who had ever wished to continue their education at the college, and those few students were easily admitted and lost within the over 1,000 students who entered our freshmen class each semester.

Now, however, open enrollment and the economic problems of the 1975-76 semester made attendance at college seem to be a most practical solution for a man who leaves prison with only a suit, a suitcase, and a dollar bill. And the prospects for an education are even more appealing if the ex-offender has been a veteran and is eligible to receive G.I. benefits.

And so in the Fall of 1976 I was approached by an ex-offender who, completing his Masters in Corrections at John Jay was wondering if something couldn't be done for the many offenders at Rikers Island, whom we had taught over the years who now wished to come to college.

I reflected for awhile, thought of the problems involved, weighted the college's responsibility to these our students, and decided to develop a pilot program for ex-offenders.

I. Establishing a College Orientation for Ex-Offenders

In establishing this program I was mindful of three objectives: First, careful consideration was given to organizing the goals for the program and establishment of responsibility for the program. Second, an assessment was made of the needs and limitations that this exceptional group of students presented to the college. Third, considerable thought was given to the promise and limitations such a program presented.

II. Planning the Orientation Program for Ex-Offenders

In was decided from the beginning that the program should have strict controls; that it should be the personal responsibility of the Dean of Students and the ex-offenders who presented him with the idea. The ex-

offender became the coordinator of the orientation program and the peer counselor for our new ex-offenders. Together they planned the program and assumed responsibility for the teaching, counseling and advisement for these exceptional college students, almost all of whom, it should be remembered, have prior college experience.

III. Primary Objective

The primary objective of the college orientation program for ex-offenders was to permit a limited number of former inmates to leave the confines of medium or maximum security correctional facilities in the New York metropolitan area and live in a correctional facility in New York City while attending classes at John Jay College. Initially this program screened and selected fifty recently paroled men and women who had served sentences ranging from two months to ten years, for offenses ranging from misdemeanors to class A felonies.

The first fifty participants were composed ethnically of 35 blacks, 10 Puerto Ricans, and 5 whites; there were forty males and ten females and they ranged in age from twenty-one to forty-two years.

IV. Ultimate Aim

The ultimate aim of this orientation program was to help rehabilitate the former inmates to achieve a productive life in society through education, not through continued incarceration. And its immediate aim was to reduce the anxiety created by the abrupt transition from the highly structured daily routine of prison with its clearly defined rules of behavior, easily learned system of reward and punishment, and inherent predictibility, to the "unstructured" outside world with its complex demands multiple and often conflicting reward and punishment system and its unpredictability. In order to reduce this anxiety of transition from prison to society, the

orientation program provided an intensive 15-week program in which the student was placed in a group with other former inmates, and the group met once weekly for one and a quarter hours. In the orientation group, the student was counseled and instructed by specialists in areas relevant to the ex-offenders college experience and immediate social adjustment. The first two meetings were conducted by the Dean of Students and by the graduate student, and ex-offender, who served as a peer counselor and was available everyday to assist the college-release student in any aspect of his life in and out of college. In the remaining 13 sessions the group was instructed by the graduate student/peer counselor and a representative from agencies such as the Parole Department, the Department of Social Services, the Fortune Society (an organization of former inmates assisting recently released inmates). In addition, the group discussed specific problems encountered upon parole such as alcohol and drug abuse, curfew violations, the pressures exerted by old friends and the old neighborhood, as well as the dilemma of having both more freedom and responsibilities.

Finally, the ex-offender was urged to join the "Linkers", a student club formed by upper classmen who are ex-offenders. This organization provides greatly needed social affiliation, while showing the former offender that anxiety and problems are not his alone and that he can successfully overcome them or at least learn to cope with them.

V. <u>The Needs and Limitations of the Ex-Offenders</u>

The program participants were multiple offenders, what many would call "hardcore criminals" - those who have had repeated contact with the criminal justice system; and who have made their living through criminal activity. Years of poverty and punishment had left them with sever deprivation in many developmental areas; they had what we defined as "global

needs". Their psychological, social and economical problems were overwhelming, and we knew that immediate adjustment to college was essential if any hope for success in the program was to be realized. Therefore, the orientation program covered topics and problems that we judged to be immediate and essential to the ex-offender's new life support system that was developing.

In order to lessen the feeling of stigma that the ex-offender felt, former inmates who are successfully completing their college education had formed a college club called the Linkers that was established for ex-offenders and provided needed social affiliation, while at the same time it showed that individual ex-offenders suffered anxiety and adjustment problems that are common and not his alone. But primarily the club fortified the hope that these adjustment problems could be overcome in time.

The participants bombarded the ex-offender coordinator of the program with their adjustment problems, both individually and in groups. They needed carfare, lunch money, book money, money for clothes, rent, child support, money for beer, cigarettes, and phone calls. Their needs never ended and their voices never stopped. They squawked like fledgings in a nest hoping their mother substitute would immediately meet their incessant demands. And if the coordinator would not or could not help, they would hammer at the door of the financial aid counselor assigned to them. They tried anything to get a foothold in a society that seemed to be punishing them even now.

VI. Promise and Limitations of the Program

The promise that an orientation program for ex-offenders to college offers the promise of rehabilitation and not retribution; it attempts to offer a hope re-entry into society to individuals whom we wished to punish

for crimes committed against us. It offers something our overcrowded prisons cannot adequately afford, namely, guidance, education, and training to those who need to made radical changes in their lives if they are to function successfully as adults in our modern society.

College programs like this develop self-esteem and hope in those who participate. Somehow the sense of being able to say, "I am going to college" - negates the feeling of having to always to say or write "I am an ex-offender". And finally, the promise of being able to get more than just a job in life seems possible if you can complete college. An education offers the hope of a career or a profession to someone who once felt that jail, and crime and fear were all that life had to offer.

My only wonder, as an administrator of such a program, is can we meet those promises - can we meet the boundless expectations of these ex-offenders be realized by us, for them?

The limitations of such a program lies within the global needs these ex-offenders present and with the ever diminishing support services a college can supply in the areas of counseling, placement, and tuition that are being rapidly depleted as college budgets shrink. These extraordinary and exceptional students need very special and continual support but we can't afford to offer it for any extended period.

Two issues which are of crucial importance to the survival and success of an orientation program such as ours are the selection of staff who can cope effectively with the daily problems encountered in working with ex-offender students, and the selection of candidates for the program. In the following papers, Dean James Malone will discuss the issue of selecting counseling and administrative personnel, particularly the experimental and personel requisites for working effectively with these exceptional students, and Dr. Philip

Bonifacio will examine the selection process which should take place before an ex-offender is accepted into the program. Dr. Bonifacio will also discuss counseling strategies that may be effective in assisting the student to make the difficult transition from incarceration to college.

Finally, two points must be re-emphasized: first, good will alone is not enough for this work; in fact, only highly qualified, professional, experienced people should attempt it. Second, it is clear that a college education is not for all ex-offenders, and special consideration must be given to selecting those who can benefit from college with the limited support services that a college can offer.

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